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## **Public money for media: how Independent is the French press?**

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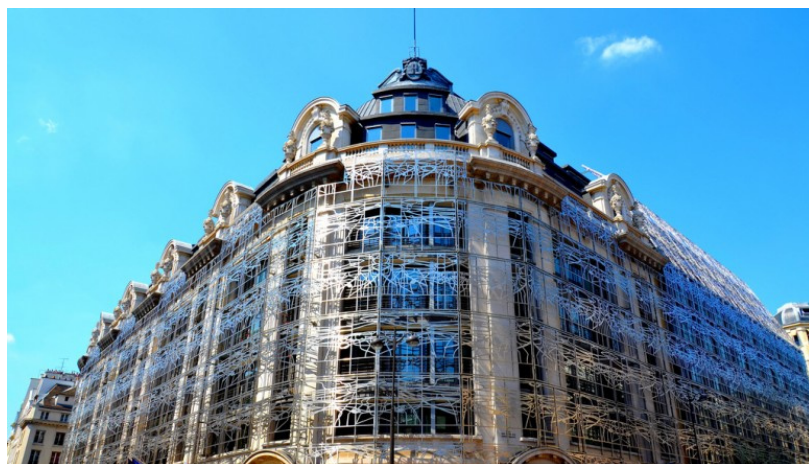
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# Public money for media: how independent is the French press?

4 février 2015 Samuel Studer &amp; Corinne Schweizer COMPRENDRE, Des Idées 360°, In English, NOW 1 commentaire

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France wants to protect its media plurality thanks to subsidies from the State. <-> How is it perceived from Switzerland where the Government doesn't spend one penny directly for any media?



After [the shooting in the newsroom of Charlie Hebdo](#), the importance of a strong press is at the tip of everyone's tongue. However, the public discussion in the aftermath of the tragic events in Paris also revealed the precarious financial situation of such small independent magazines. French Minister of Culture and Communication, Fleur Pellerin, therefore [announced the plan to expand the French media subsidy system](#) so that it would also include support for weekly and monthly magazines. While this decision might receive much sympathy right now, subsidies for the media are normally a much-contested issue. Many argue that the French press already depends very much on state aid, which is at odds with their role as a fourth estate, as it could potentially compromise their independence.

## 400 millions euro per year in France

From a Swiss perspective, at first sight, the French press market indeed seems to be highly subsidized. French newspapers and magazines receive direct production support for approximately 400 million Euro per year altogether, while the Swiss Government does not spend one measly penny for this purpose. However, a comparison of these plain numbers is misleading, as there are other, less visible, indirect forms of support. [In our recent study](#) on the public financial support for private media in Europe and overseas, we use a common way to categorize support measures: On the one hand, either media organizations receive direct financial support, or the state supports them indirectly by creating a "favourable situation", for example, by allowing tax breaks. On the other hand, either measures can favour all members of an industry or they can privilege selected media organizations that meet certain requirements.

France and Switzerland both use indirect measures to create a favourable situation for all members of the press industry: They reduce the VAT for press products ([in France from 19.2 % to 2.1 %](#), in Switzerland from 8 % to 2.5%) and grant financial support to news agencies. Furthermore, the French government funds reading promotion and the Swiss Government supports journalism education and media research. Both countries also use measures of distribution aid: While France supports postal and rail transport, newspaper delivery and distribution abroad, Switzerland only supports postal transport. However, the main difference between the two systems lies in the fact that Switzerland – other than France – completely abstains from direct production subsidies for the press.

## How to maintain a plural media market?

Many scholars argue that press subsidies could be a suitable tool to hinder media concentration and to preserve a plural media landscape. They point out that the press in western European countries is nowadays under pressure: With the rise of the internet, readers' attention drifted slowly away from the newspaper. As a result, newspaper circulation decreased. Moreover, – as money follows attention – advertising revenues started to decrease and shifted to the internet, too. Because of their precarious economic situation, many publishers needed to sell their newspapers to large media corporations, or had to close them down completely. This led to an overall decrease of press subsidies and advertising revenues, and media concentration.



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